

READY FOR SUCCESS:

Expanding Effective Early Childhood Education: Texas Case Study



Council of Chief State School Officers

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The Division of State Services and Technical Assistance supports state education agencies in developing standards-based systems that enable all children to succeed. Initiatives of the division support improved methods for collecting, analyzing and using information for decision-making; development of assessment resources; creation of high-quality professional preparation and development programs; emphasis on instruction suited for diverse learners; and the removal of barriers to academic success. The division combines existing activities of the former Resource Center on Educational Equity and State Education Assessment Center.

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The Early Childhood and Family Education activities at the Council are founded on its standing Policy Statement on Early Childhood and Family Education adopted in 1999 that supports early childhood education based on the large body of knowledge about our youngest learners, and the increasing public awareness of their growing need for quality early education experiences to assure success for all in the K-12 years. Current activities are designed to assist chief state school officers and their staffs in implementing research-based education policy and practice for young learners that focus on three important aspects of the field: appropriate standards and assessment development for early education; strengthened professional preparation and development for the early childhood teaching workforce; and enabling and empowering parents and families to provide productive learning environments for their young children.

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Prekindergarten in Texas: A Fundamental Part of Educating Disadvantaged Children

I. Background

Early childhood education in Texas has been a long-term proposition. Like prekindergarten programs in several other states, it owes its origins to Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was enacted in 1965 to offer children in areas of concentrated poverty the opportunity for greater achievement in school. In Texas, the new infusion of federal money under Title I was focused on what educators at that time thought of as the state's youngest children of potential school age—kindergarten-age children. No publicly financed kindergartens existed in Texas at the time, so Title I funds were used to provide half-day educational experiences to help disadvantaged children get ready for the academic challenge of first grade.

Soon, communities of various economic levels throughout the state wanted kindergarten for their children as well. In 1969 Texas education law was amended to permit local school districts to offer kindergarten at local expense if they wanted the program. It was not until the early 1970s that state funds were added to the mix of revenues that could be used to pay for the kindergarten programs.

By the late 1970s, business leaders, educators, policy makers, and parents were becoming more and more concerned about the dismal failure of the public school system to educate the youth of the state and prepare a competent workforce. In 1984, a special legislative session was called for the purpose of considering a major overhaul of education. The Texas Legislature responded by passing reform education legislation that included the provision of preschool for disadvantaged children. The Prekindergarten Program began in the 1985–1986 school year with a special line item in the budget of \$30 million to serve 34,412 4-year-olds in half-day programs.

In recent years the Texas Prekindergarten Program has been able to serve close to 133,000 3- and 4-year-olds for school year 2000–2001 (and up to 164,000 in 2001–2002) with \$278 million in Foundation School Program money from the state, plus \$200 million for 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 for Expansion Grants. Similar amounts have been made available for 2001–2002 and 2002–2003. These figures do not include the amounts districts spend from local funds or, in some districts, a portion of their federal Title I dollars.

Since 1991 prekindergarten has been tucked securely into the regular Foundation Program that funds K–12 education and is considered part of the established way of doing business, at least for disadvantaged children. Indeed, today the number of children attending prekindergarten is about half the

number statewide who attend kindergarten, which school districts must offer to all students, but for which attendance is voluntary. As the state learns how to operate with a significant budget deficit, which some have put at the \$5 to \$6 billion level, it is hoped that the program will be protected. In fact, some educators have suggested that if “push comes to shove” over the budget for education, the state would be better off shortening the high school years rather than pinching back on early childhood education. Whether such a notion would be seriously considered is unclear, but the state’s commitment to prekindergarten education is certain.

II. Getting Started

Every state has its unsung heroes who have championed particular causes. In Texas, early childhood education has had four such heroes, two of them very well known, though not exclusively for their dedication to early childhood education, and two of them not so well known. The Texas story about educating the state’s very young children centers on these individuals.

The success of efforts in Texas to close the gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their better-situated age-peers has been heralded, examined—though not all that closely—questioned, and copied. While full answers to the questions of what Texas has accomplished, and how, continue to be elusive, part of the answer and a good part of the credit go to Lyndon Baines Johnson. Dr. William Kirby, former commissioner of education in Texas and another of the state’s unsung heroes, gives former President Johnson a lot of the credit for getting it all started with his push for civil rights and war on poverty, with education central to both. When President Johnson championed and introduced the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, his fellow Texans were very proud and took very seriously the recognition in Title I of the Act that children from low-income families have special needs when it comes to education, especially when their families are concentrated in high-poverty areas and school zones.

Dr. William Kirby joined the staff of the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in December 1965. As Title I funds began to flow to the states, he became the director of the Division of Program and Staff Development, from which the program was administered. As he puts it, he went to TEA to give away Title I money. With the decision to use its Title I money to start kindergarten programs for disadvantaged children, which were almost nonexistent in Texas at the time except for a few small programs that centered on language development, Kirby traveled throughout the state to help get these new programs off the ground. The program could not have had a stronger advocate. He was and is a firm believer that it is much more cost-effective to prevent educational difficulties than to remedy them later. By 1969 parents throughout the state were calling for kindergarten services for their children. The legislature answered the call by amending state law to permit local school districts to provide kindergarten programs if they so chose. This left the decision to local pressure, or the public will that is so often essential for



getting things done in Texas, a state where education is a very political issue. In 1970, state dollars were added to the resources available to fund half-day kindergartens for disadvantaged students.

At this point, grave concerns across the state about significant and growing numbers of education failures, even in the early grades, aligned with electoral politics at the highest level of state government. For the first time in more than 100 years, a Republican was elected to the governor's post in 1979. Governor William P. Clements, for whom education was not a major issue, served one four-year term and was beaten in his 1983 re-election bid by Mark White, who had garnered the support of teachers' organizations with the promise of a significant pay raise for teachers. However, with growing concerns about the dismal quality of education in the state, legislators insisted that they have something to show toward improvement in educational outcomes to justify the raises. Faced with the inability to make good on his promise to teachers and wide-ranging interest in improving education throughout the state, Governor White called upon H. Ross Perot for help. He asked Perot to head a Citizens' Commission that would figure out "how to fix it," as Perot likes to say.

The Citizens' Commission included laypeople as well as members from the State Board of Education, educators, and representatives from the State House and Senate. Its members traveled around the state for a year, looking into every aspect of education and listening to anyone who had something to say about the system's problems and their possible solutions. Perot met with leaders of the business community, where he was held in high regard and had a personal entrée and influence, in every corner of Texas to encourage their commitment to education reform.

Economically the state was in very good condition and in a period of fiscal growth, which encouraged the Commission to think in bold strokes. In the spring of 1984 the Commission presented recommendations that amounted to a complete overhaul of the educational system. A Special Legislative Session met for the summer of 1984 exclusively to consider the Commission's recommendations, which were introduced as HR 72. The sheer scope of the bill and its implications guaranteed that almost every education organization in the state, especially teachers' groups, had serious problems with it. It called for teacher testing and re-certification and student testing as cornerstones of an accountability system, in addition to strict rules such as "No Pass, No Play; No Pass, No Cheer; No Pass, No Agricultural Display." Teachers and educators, students, and even parents felt the threatening impact of the changes the reforms might bring, as well as their promise of better education. Nearly all education organizations fought the bill, and they were initially successful. The House Committee on Education voted many of the controversial recommendations out of the bill and passed a watered-down version of the education reform legislation that barely deserved the name "reform." However, Perot was prepared for such opposition and had hired several influential lobbyists to fight for the Commission's reforms in their purest form.^{lxxiv} Early that same week on the floor of the House, during a

marathon session, one by one, each of the missing reform provisions was added back into the bill. Both kindergarten and prekindergarten were part of HR 72 and the legislation that was finally signed into law.

Under the reform legislation, districts were required to provide kindergarten, although they could choose to make it a half-day or a whole-day program. Attendance was voluntary. School districts with disadvantaged students—that is, children who were eligible for the school’s free or reduced-price lunch program or of limited English proficiency (LEP)—would now have to offer a half-day prekindergarten program to 4-year-olds. Bilingual staff would be required in schools having LEP students. All existing teachers would have to be re-certified through a one-time testing program to weed out inadequate teachers, and all new teachers would have to pass state tests to obtain their state certification.

Bold and thoughtful as these new education measures were, for many educators in the state they were simply overwhelming. Approximately 6,000 teachers left the profession as a result of failing the re-certification test or refusing to take it.

Happily, the desperate cry for educators qualified to teach at the prekindergarten level that many states hear as they initiate preschool programs was mitigated by positive circumstances in Texas. Home economics departments in some institutions of higher education, such as the University of Texas at Austin, already offered courses in early childhood education that could prepare early elementary teachers and higher education students for the newly mandated Prekindergarten Program.

In Perot and Kirby, education reform had champions who were in it for the long haul. In a backlash against the education reforms, Clements knocked White out of the governor’s office in the 1986 election with the support of teachers who feared the reforms and teacher testing that had already occurred. When Governor Clements sought a \$500 million cut in the education budget, money crucial to putting the reforms in place and making them effective, Kirby went to Perot. No one has been able to tell this author just what Perot did or said to whom, except to tell Kirby that he, Perot, would take care of the politics and Kirby, then the commissioner of education, should keep the reforms moving forward. The education budget was actually increased by half a billion dollars, making the overall Texas budget appropriation for education the largest in its history up to that time. Perhaps one of the Texas lessons is that it is important to start with what you can get, get it under way, and then hope the public will demand more and better.

This philosophy has given the state nearly two decades to develop and improve its prekindergarten and regular education programs. The reforms were very tough to put in place and took a number of years of exceptionally hard work. Commissioner Kirby, who held his doctorate degree in reading and early childhood education, traveled the state presenting workshops on how to implement the Prekindergarten Program and the other major reforms without offending political forces that would object to what some would call

intrusive government, over-regulation, and high taxes. Actually, the Prekindergarten Program seems by some measures to be under-regulated, a topic that will be discussed later in this report.

III. Prekindergarten Today

The Texas Prekindergarten Program looks pretty much the same today as it did when it started, except that it has gotten bigger and better. Because of its long tenure, program administrators and teachers have had time to work toward quality at the local level, using guidance from the state and professional development training.

Who Is Served

All school districts that can identify as many as 15 eligible 4-year-olds must provide prekindergarten. If the district has 15 eligible 3-year-olds it may, but is not required to, offer them a program as well. Three- and 4-year-olds may be served in the same classrooms. Since parents are not required to send their children to prekindergarten, making sure the children who need the services actually get them depends on getting the word out in the community about the availability and value of the program. The Texas Education Code requires each school district to develop a system of notification to the community that the program is available. These notifications must be in both Spanish and English. School districts use letters sent home from school with other students, information available at the times and places of school registration for older siblings, newspaper articles, postings in public places, radio announcements, displays on school marquees, and community newsletters. If a school district contracts with another provider for the Prekindergarten Program, the district is still responsible for notifying the public of its availability.

The Prekindergarten Program is designed to help disadvantaged children achieve school readiness and success. Therefore, eligibility for the program has been restricted to children who are at least 3 years old and educationally disadvantaged as defined by family poverty criteria set out in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, unable to speak and comprehend the English language, or homeless. Districts have the discretion to enroll other children either at the district's expense or through tuition paid by the family. At present fewer than 20 districts allow such students to attend prekindergarten by paying tuition. However, these districts must ensure that serving such students does not interfere with serving eligible children. Further, the tuition rate charged must not exceed the added costs of providing the program to the child and must be approved by the commissioner of education.



The 2001–2002 figure of 164,359 students served represents approximately 73% of the eligible students. These numbers break down as follows:

3-year-olds	22,030 children served (13% LEP students, 66% educationally disadvantaged)
4-year-olds	142,329 children served (39% LEP students, 85% educationally disadvantaged)
Total	164,359 children served (28% LEP students)
In addition to 3- and 4-year-olds attending pre-kindergarten, 37,224 disabled 3- and 4-year-olds are served under Part B of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).	

Program Growth over the Years

School Year	Cost	No. of Students Served	% of Eligible Students Served	No. of Districts with Programs
1985–1986	\$30,219,274	34,412	NA	302
1993–1994	\$195,000,000	103,357	69%	688
1999–2000	\$267,000,000	125,616	72%	NA
2000–2001	\$278,000,000	132,870	73%	844
2001–2002	\$[to come?]	164,359*	73%	925 (out of 1,264 districts)

**This figure does not include 37,244 disabled 3- and 4-year-olds with disabilities who are served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part B.*

NA = not applicable.



Program Purpose

The stated purpose of the Prekindergarten Program is to ensure that disadvantaged children develop the skills necessary for success in the regular public school curriculum, including language, mathematics, and social skills.

What Is Offered

Districts that have a state-funded prekindergarten program must provide at least three hours of programming, although they may expand their program to a full day using either their own local funds, state Expansion Grant funds for which they must apply, federal Title I funds, or Migrant funds.

Transportation is not required, but districts may offer it and include transportation of prekindergarten youngsters in their regular transportation program.

Currently, there is no required class size or student/teacher ratio for prekindergarten. Between 1992 and 1995, prekindergarten programs had to meet the licensing standards for childcare set by the Texas Department of Protection and Regulatory Services. These standards required an 18:1 student/teacher ratio for 4-year-olds and a 15:1 ratio for 3-year-olds. Since 1995, the State Board of Education has lost much of its power in a long-term power struggle between the State Board of Education and the legislature. By law, K–4 classrooms have a 22:1 student/teacher ratio, though this does not apply to prekindergarten. For prekindergarten programs, the student/teacher ratio is a matter of local discretion. However, school districts are encouraged to maintain student/teacher ratios that, at a minimum, do not exceed the 22:1 ratio required for kindergarten through first grade. TEA encourages this limitation on class size through a variety of mechanisms. For example, in the *Frequently Asked Questions and Answers for Prekindergarten* published on the TEA web site and in other documents, the state has said, “Such a decision [not to exceed the 22:1 student/teacher ratio] by a school district will be in the best interest of the district and its prekindergarten students. It is important for school districts to make decisions that will be conducive to enabling prekindergarten students to be as successful as other students in the public school system.”^{lxxv}

Teachers in the Prekindergarten Program must have a certification that qualifies them to teach in prekindergarten through fourth grade classrooms. In addition, they must have an Early Childhood Education or Kindergarten endorsement. If they are teaching LEP or bilingual students, they also must have an LEP or Bilingual Education endorsement. Districts are not required to provide teacher aides or assistants in the classrooms.

Texas does not have a required curriculum for prekindergarten. In 1991, both the prekindergarten and kindergarten programs were included in a set of Essential Elements describing what students were expected to master at each grade level, pre-K–12. The Essential Elements for prekindergarten had a “focus on the areas of communication, cognition, motor, fine arts,

social/emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and physical development.”^{lxxvi} In 1995 the state legislature passed a law calling for TEA to develop Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for grades K–12, again specifying what a child should know at each grade level. Prekindergarten was explicitly left out of the new requirement, according to some, deliberately. When the TEKS was formally adopted by the State Board of Education in 1997, the Essential Elements were repealed. This left the Prekindergarten Program uncertain of what was expected of local program providers and what kinds of guidance the state could and should give them. To help fill this gap, a working group of educators and community members from across the state convened, under the direction of then Commissioner of Education Mike Moses, to draft guidelines for a prekindergarten curriculum that school districts could use voluntarily. This group called upon Texas educators, nationally known experts outside the state, professional organizations, and university personnel to assist in articulating what 3- and 4-year-olds should know and be able to do. The resulting Curriculum Guidelines were presented to focus groups for input. Released in final form on December 10, 1999, the guidelines help align the Prekindergarten Program with the Kindergarten TEKS and help educators make informed decisions about curriculum content for prekindergarten children.^{lxxvii} Reiterated in the final document is the statement that “use of these guidelines is voluntary.”^{lxxviii}

IV. Evaluation, Accountability, and Program Improvement

Education in Texas is a very political endeavor. It is also subject to strong feelings of local control across the state. One interviewee for this report suggested that Ross Perot, godfather of the education reforms that have brought Texas so much success and national acclaim, must be stunned to see how small a role the state now plays in directing what happens in education. This was not what he envisioned when he championed statewide education reform.

The Early Childhood Education Unit in the Division of Curriculum and Professional Development provides some assistance by answering questions and giving advice when called upon by local program administrators. Generally, however, local school districts are left alone unless they request help.^{lxxix} Most of this help must come from the one-person staff of that office, Cami Jones, the final of the four unsung heroes of the early childhood program in Texas. William Kirby calls hiring Cami Jones one of the best decisions he ever made as commissioner of education. She has worked with the Prekindergarten Program for nearly all of its existence and is still on the board at TEA.

The 1989–1995 Evaluation Study

State requirements for the Prekindergarten Program are minimal, as are monitoring and oversight activities by TEA. However, the state remains



concerned about the quality of the program. While education and political leaders in Texas recognized that prekindergarten experiences are critical to the later success of disadvantaged children, many questioned the ability of local school districts to provide sufficiently high-quality early childhood education to make a real difference. In 1989, with funds from Title I, Chapter 2 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, TEA initiated a five-year study of the Prekindergarten Program to examine both implementation features and program outcomes for children.

This intensive examination of the Prekindergarten Program included four components:

- A statewide survey of program characteristics, implementation practices, and parents' perceptions
- A case study of ten schools to look in depth at program implementation in relationship to developmentally appropriate practices
- A self-study in which staff of the case study schools rate their programs in terms of the developmental quality of their classroom practices (The purpose of this portion of the study was to make prekindergarten staff more aware of the quality of their early childhood education practices in the classroom and more receptive to using the findings of the study.)
- A longitudinal study comparing 2,000 program participants with 600 children who were eligible but did not participate, to indicate program outcomes and effectiveness in helping disadvantaged youngsters perform better in the regular academic program of elementary school

Implementation Practices. The first two years of the study focused on implementation practices and parents' perceptions of the Prekindergarten Program as a critical prelude to understanding program effectiveness. The evaluators looked at such factors as classroom materials, teacher-child interactions, and administrative support. Then, they compared findings of these first two years of the study with a second look at these same factors at the end of the five-year study.

Findings from the first two years of the study indicated that classroom practices were not generally developmentally appropriate. In determining what kinds of classroom practices should be considered developmentally appropriate, the study team used the guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The NAEYC framework focuses more on *how* teaching takes place than on *what* is taught and discourages a mere "downward escalation of curriculum" in establishing teaching practices and content for prekindergarten children. Both age appropriateness and individual appropriateness dimensions are critical to determining best practices in early childhood education. While the study's final two-year examination of classroom practices showed increased staff awareness of what practices were developmentally appropriate, teachers still had a difficult time translating what they knew into program practices. Most

staff held an elementary rather than an early childhood education certification, explaining the prevalence of prekindergarten classrooms that mirrored elementary school classrooms. Also, staff did not seem to be aware of strategies for facilitating language development of all children, particularly LEP students.^{lxxx}

During the final two years of the study, evaluators found that classroom practices had improved steadily in terms of progress toward developmentally appropriate practices. Scheduling of activities, increased child-initiated activity, improved teacher-child interactions, and the creation of environments better suited to preschool-age children had all been effected. In addition to these indications of program improvements, the self-study reflected movement toward higher-quality prekindergarten programs.^{lxxxi} These findings do show encouraging trends over the course of the five-year study. However, much of the change noted through in-depth case studies may have been a result of participation in the study. Training staff to report their activities in the self-study segment of the research may have made teachers and administrators more aware of their actions and practices. This possibility makes generalizing about trends over the five-year period impossible. It does, however, show the significant impact that staff development can have on the program.

Outcomes for Children. The conclusions of the study, published in 1995, were that attending prekindergarten classes made a difference in children's lives and that over time, the program provided them with gains in academic performance. Four years after prekindergarten attendance, the study found that the students who attended were:

- Less likely to be retained
- Closer to being on grade level in their reading comprehension based on data reported by teachers
- Less likely to be referred for special education programs

A comparison of the achievement of similar third graders on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills showed normal curve equivalent (NCE) scores about two points higher in both reading and mathematics for the former prekindergarten students than for those who did not attend prekindergarten. For LEP students these differences were even greater. However, these scores for both LEP and non-LEP students were still lower than the statewide average for third graders in Texas.^{lxxxii}

Final Recommendations from the Evaluation Study. Texas educators, administrators, and policy makers can be gratified by changes in the Prekindergarten Program in the direction of improved practices and long-term academic benefits to the children who attend the program. The final report of the study is organized around six areas:

- Program philosophy and classroom practices
- LEP students
- The prekindergarten environment
- Play-based learning and the Prekindergarten Program



- Parents' satisfaction and involvement with the Prekindergarten Program
- Education outcomes of children who attend prekindergarten
- Even more can be accomplished as the study's chapter-by-chapter recommendations are implemented. Final recommendations include the following:
- Provision of staff development to administrators and instructional staff at both the pre-service and in-service levels
- Revision of the state teacher evaluation instrument and process to make it responsive to and accountable for the characteristics that demonstrate developmentally appropriate practices in prekindergarten through early elementary grades
- Development of reflective strategies and evaluation skills of administrators and instructional staff to guide implementation practices in the classroom
- Provision of training and support to prekindergarten and elementary staff in implementing the State Board of Education Policy for Early Childhood and Elementary Education
- Identification of programs that are demonstrating exemplary developmentally appropriate practices to participate in the elementary mentor network and to provide observation sites for developing programs
- Participation in prekindergarten by all children who are eligible for the program^{lxxxiii}

State Monitoring of Programs

State monitoring and data collection for the Prekindergarten Program are fairly minimal in Texas. However, state law does require TEA, in consultation with the Department of Human Resources, to do some monitoring as well as evaluation of prekindergarten programs (Education Code, 29.154). The Evaluation Study discussed above has validated the program's success. Additional studies outside of Texas have also credited the size and scope of the Texas Prekindergarten Program with some of the high marks education in Texas receives. The Rand report, *Improving Student Achievement: What State NAEP Test Scores Tell Us*, issued in July 2000, puts Texas at the head of the line in making achievement gains and elevating student performance compared with students of similar racial and socioeconomic background in other states. The Rand analysis cites the large percentage of children in public prekindergarten as one of the three major factors that accounts for the gains made in Texas.^{lxxxiv}

Within the state, the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) provides some data for ongoing monitoring of the Prekindergarten Program. However, it is not complete in that it excludes any information on homeless participants, one of the three categories of student eligibility. Carole

Keeton Rylander, the state's comptroller of public accounts, says this makes a complete evaluation impossible. Rylander further considers the TEA District Effectiveness and Compliance monitoring system inadequate in that it includes in its monitoring reviews only prekindergarten programs serving children who are eligible for bilingual and English as a second language programs and for migrant education or state or federal compensatory education funds. Programs that fall outside these parameters do not receive any state oversight. Rylander has recommended that these system gaps be corrected by requiring TEA to collect state PEIMS data on all prekindergarten programs offered by Texas public schools, including their type of funding and demographic information on students served, and that the District Effectiveness and Compliance monitoring system be expanded to include reviews of all prekindergarten programs funded by state or federal dollars.^{lxxxv}

Program Improvement Efforts

TEA has done no recent study or broad collection of information on the Prekindergarten Program since the *Evaluation Study of Prekindergarten Programs, Final Report* was released in 1995 to review the extent to which the report's recommendations have been utilized across the state. However, TEA has published and distributed several documents that should contribute to continued program improvement.

Curriculum Guidelines for Prekindergarten. In 1999 voluntary prekindergarten Curriculum Guidelines were developed to help educators make informed decisions about the content of curriculum for 3- and 4-year-olds. The guidelines describe specific goals for prekindergarten children in each of the academic content areas. They emphasize that for students whose first language is not English, the students' native language serves as the foundation for English acquisition. Specific guidelines for the language and literacy development of children whose home language is not English but who are in English-only settings for prekindergarten are addressed within each component of language and literacy development.

Incentives for Collaboration. Also in 1999, the Texas Workforce Commission and the Texas Head Start State Collaboration Project of the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin developed two very informative documents: *Texas Core Standards for Early Childhood Programs Side-by-Side Comparison Document* and *Texas Core Standards and Self-Assessment Tool for Center-Based Early Childhood Programs*. Together these documents go a long way toward facilitating collaboration between early care and education programs that operate under different statutory authorities. They provide assistance to program providers, policy decision makers, and parents in cutting through the confusion of what Bess Keller, writing for *Quality Counts 2002*, describes as "a fragmented system of child care" that confounds broad action "to get the youngest Texans ready for school."^{lxxxvi}



As early as 1987 the state legislature expressed concern about multiple programs, all with different standards and requirements and goals, serving overlapping populations. HB 500 fueled a landmark investigation of childcare program standards and a report describing their similarities and differences, rules, and standards. The Texas Head Start Collaboration Project took the lead role in developing improved coordination of programs. In 1996 the Project published the *Interagency Workgroup Report on the Coordination of Early Care and Education Programs* with recommendations for achieving greater coordination among Head Start, public school prekindergarten, and childcare programs. One of these recommendations was to standardize program requirements across settings and coordinate the range of services offered at the same site to improve the quality of care and education of young children.

This effort to improve all early childhood care and education programs brought a keen recognition of the difference between coordination and collaboration, the former involving shared goals and some shared resources with partners maintaining their independence, the latter involving partners sharing in a decision-making process to achieve common goals. In Texas, collaboration has been increasingly viewed as essential for early childhood care and education. Otherwise, programs would miss the opportunity to gain from the strength of other partners, and the needs of children and families would be met with confusion, duplication, and gaps in services.

The 1999 documents were developed as a way to identify and reduce the barriers to program and service collaboration. The Program Standards Committee of the Texas Head Start State Collaboration Project found eight areas in need of program alignment:

- Program design
- Family involvement
- Community coordination/collaboration
- Human resources
- Administration
- Evaluation
- Eligibility requirements criteria
- Contact with families

The Texas Core Standards for Early Childhood Programs Side-by-Side Comparison Document. This document is helpful and very easy to use as a reference and guide to the fundamentals of all the state's programs for early childhood care and education. It gives the program requirements of the eight major childcare and early education programs or agencies in the areas listed above. The programs addressed in the publication are listed below, with their statutory authority and participation figures for 1996–1997 to give an indication of comparative program size:

Program	Children Served
Prekindergarten Program of TEA (Texas Education Code 29.153)	120,053 disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds
TEA Pre-School Program for Children with Disabilities (IDEA, Part B)	34,398 disabled 3- to 5-year-olds
TEA Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—Part A (PL 103-382, Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Title I – Part A)	97,500 preschool children on regular campuses targeted to receive Title I funds
TEA Even Start (PL 103-382, Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Title I – Part B)	3,451 families in “need” with at least one child from birth to age 7
Texas Workforce Commission Childcare Program (Title VI: Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Texas Human Resources Code: Chapter 44 and Title XX of the Social Security Act)	Over 70,000 disadvantaged children from birth to age 12 receiving extended day care through 5,500 vendors and 27 contractors
Head Start and Early Head Start (Head Start Act, Sec. 635 of PL 97-35)	Serving impoverished families with children from birth to age 5—54,230 in Head Start and 493 in Early Head Start
Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (Chapter 42 of the Human Resources Code)	Serving children in out-of-home care in 20,000 regulated, licensed, and registered facilities
Military (the Military Child Care Act of 1989 and 1996 under policy of the Department of Defense)	Serving over 200,000 children daily from birth to age 12 in families of civilian employees working full-time and children of Contract workers and reservists worldwide

Texas Core Standards and Self-Assessment Tool for Center-Based Early Childhood Programs. The Self-Assessment Tool was designed to assist early care and education agencies in identifying their program strengths and weaknesses and aligning their standards in the program areas listed earlier. Its purpose is to help program providers to:

- Gain an overall picture of the program operation from various perspectives



- Identify areas of strength and those needing further improvement
- Develop an Improvement Plan, identify technical support needs and resources, and review progress
- Provide a forum for continuous improvements

As is typical with education in Texas, the effort to align program standards is one of helping program providers examine their programs in relation to other programs with similar or overlapping goals, rather than seeking legislative or regulatory changes or binding requirements.

The Self-Assessment Tool is intended for use by center-based services, not those provided by school districts, family childcare homes, or other home-based services. It includes a helpful glossary of relevant terms and acronyms, suggested directions for its use, tips to consider in using it, potential benefits and outcomes of a self-assessment, a list of additional resources, a format for an Improvement Plan and Improvement Plan Update, a contact and resources form, and a summary of the Texas Early Care and Education Career Development System, as well as the assessment tool itself.

V. Continuing Challenges

Even without extensive monitoring, evaluation, and state oversight, it seems clear that good things are happening in the Texas Prekindergarten Program. The July 2000 Rand study, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, and analyses by several different agencies all point to students making academic gains in the regular grades, particularly students who are disadvantaged and students for whom English is not their first or home language. However, keeping pace with the fast-growing number of needy students and continuing to fine-tune the Prekindergarten Program during the current economic downturn will be difficult, particularly given very strong anti-tax sentiments among legislators. The state is currently looking at a \$5 to \$6 billion deficit.

Currently the Prekindergarten Program is serving about 73% of the eligible students. Still, Bill Ratliffe, the lieutenant governor and long-time leader of the Senate, says, “I think we have far too many kids coming into first grade unprepared.”^{lxxxvii} Recent tightened welfare restrictions in combination with the increased spending on childcare subsidies since the mid-1990s overhaul of the welfare system will further increase the demand for prekindergarten slots.

Student achievement assessments begin with third grade, so it is difficult to identify the precise point at which students start to fall behind, how far behind they are by kindergarten, or how well they are doing. It is hard to assess just what to fix since it is not clear just where the system is “broken,” if indeed it is. The pressure to find out will come soon enough. In its 2001 session, the legislature renewed the \$200 million (\$100 million each for two years) in additional funding for expansion of prekindergarten programs, but it rejected a one-year delay in implementation of a requirement that third

graders who are unprepared not be promoted. This requirement will kick in at the end of the 2002–2003 school year. Policy makers will want to see a payoff for the money they have been putting into the Prekindergarten Program. If it is not there, they are likely to ask why. If too many third graders must be retained, perhaps this will trigger a closer look at how to achieve accountability at each grade level, an assessment of where programs are falling short, and a strategy for further program improvement.

Another challenge likely to strain the education budget in the years to come is the erosion of equity in the Texas school financing system. The current foundation program for funding schools covers only 40% of the overall school cost. Attempts to have the state take over additional schooling cost by creation of a state-run system of health insurance for school employees failed when the \$1.2 billion price tag for the first year became apparent.^{lxxxviii} Had the measure passed, it might have softened growing discontent with financing inequities.

On top of these fiscal woes are the teacher shortages, especially for LEP students, and facilities shortages faced by many other states as well. Right now the much momentum behind the preschool movement comes from several sources:

- The brain research that tells us that the early years are when certain kinds of learning are critical to children's cognitive development and later school success
- The interest in and cost-effectiveness of prevention rather than remediation
- Research and model programs that tell us what constitutes a quality preschool program
- A renewal of early childhood education preparation programs at institutions of higher education

President George W. Bush, a former Texas governor, has said that the nation's public schools can and must do better, and that all students must be able to read by grade three. This adds pressure on the early grades in all states, but particularly in Texas. Recognition that early childhood education is essential to success in meeting this goal puts even more pressure on the Texas prekindergarten and elementary school programs to excel. Texas can be grateful for all this nationwide attention. It will keep the prekindergarten commitment strong during these tough fiscal times. And the state will meet the challenge, if the past few decades are any indication of the strength of Texan will.



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